Among the Apple Trees

By Clifford V. Gregory

A Story of Farm Life

Read and there will unfold for you a romance from which you will learn how two plucky daughters of the farm yearned for a college education; how their father gave them the use of a wornout orchard to secure the money necessary; how they grappled with the apple raising problem and Snyder, the sharper, who was cornering the apple crop; how their ambition had much to do with the futures of two young men, one rich and one poor; how the wornout orchard influenced directly or indirectly not only the lives of four young people, but college work, college sport and college morals as well, and how some of those concerned in this idyl of farm and college were at last persuaded to exchange apple blossoms for orange blossoms.

CHAPTER I.

"OH, daddy!"

Mr. Sanders looked up from the harness he was mending in preparation for spring's work to see his two daughters standing before him.

"Well?" he said, with an inquiring smile.

"We—we want to go to college," said Mabel. She was the older of the two, a fair haired girl of seventeen. Her sister Gladys was a year younger, a short, plump little girl with unruly brown hair and an irrepressible smile.

Their father let the strap he was holding fall to the floor.

"What for?" he asked.

"To learn things," said Mabel. "We want to go to the agricultural college and take the domestic science course. If you'll come in the house I'll show you what the catalogue says about it."

Mr. Sanders picked up his strap and went to work again. "You're mighty good girls," he said, "and I want to do all I can for you, but I don't see where the money to send you to college is coming from."

Mabel's lip quivered. "Then can't—can't we go?" she asked.

Her father's eyes twinkled as he looked up. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "I'll give you girls the old apple orchard, and you can use all the money you make from it to go to college with."

The old apple orchard consisted of an acre of apple trees that Mr. Sanders had set out several years before with the expectation of reaping a handsome reward when they should reach bearing age. But the locality was not especially well adapted to apple growing. Weeds and insects played havoc, and the orchard turned out to be anything but a paying proposition.

Mabel turned abruptly and left the shop, but Gladys sat down on a nail keg, with her forehead puckered up in thought. After a few moments she got up and went over to the window. There had been a hard frost the night before, and the apple trees were laden with a white coating of frost crystals that shone and sparkled in the sunlight.

"It's pretty this morning anyway," she said. "Can we really have it to do as we please with?"

"That's what I said," her father answered. "You'll have a hard time getting anything out of it, though."

"Well," Gladys replied determinedly, "we're going to get something out of it. I believe we can make that old orchard pay our way through college."

Mr. Sanders smiled. "I hope so," he said. "I'll help you all I can."

"I'm going over to Pearson's this afternoon," said Gladys as they were seated at the dinner table that noon. "Do you want to go along, Mabel?"

"What for?" asked Mabel.

"To find out how he raises so many apples."

"He's got better apple soil than we have," spoke up Mr. Sanders.

"Maybe that isn't the only reason," persisted Gladys. "I want to talk with him anyway."

Mr. Sanders had a three-year-old colt, which the girls had broken to drive that winter. They had had many a lively tussle with it before it would acknowledge that it was conquered, but now it was as quiet and docile as could be asked for and would follow the girls around like a big dog.

Gladys always insisted that Mollie, as they called the colt, needed only a little training to rival Lou Dillon. Indeed, she had boasted of Mollie's speed qualities so much that Mrs. Sanders could not be induced to ride behind her, and she held her breath every time the girls drove out of the yard with the colt.

After the dinner dishes were washed and put away the girls hitched Mollie to the old fashioned square box cutter and drove over to Pearson's.

Mr. Pearson was a somewhat eccentric old farmer. He spent most of his time pottering around in his orchard and garden, leaving his three boys to do the farm work. The neighbors were forced to admit that he raised fine fruit, but they were inclined to give credit to his rich, somewhat sandy soil rather than to his painstaking care. He rubbed his bald head delightedly when the girls told him their errand.

"Of course you can make it pay!" he exclaimed. "That acre of apple trees ought to send half a dozen girls to college."

Thereupon he entered into a lengthy discussion on apple growing, which the girls only half understood, though they listened with growing interest.

"What you want to do first," said Mr. Pearson, "is to prune your trees—cut out about a third of the old limbs and let the sun have a chance to get in. Jeff's out pruning now, I think. Don't you want to come on out and see how it's done?"

Their feet made no noise in the soft snow, and Jeff, who was busily sawing away, did not notice them until his father spoke.

He turned quickly and almost fell out of the tree in his embarrassment at seeing the girls. He was a tall, lank, awkward boy of eighteen, but when his honest smile lighted up the freckles on his usually solemn face his ungainliness was forgotten.

"Hello!" he said in response to the girls' greeting as he started to climb down from the tree.

"Hold on," his father said. "Mabel and Gladys here want to learn how to prune apple trees. They are going to ship a carload of apples from their father's orchard next fall." And he chuckled as he pulled off his cap and rubbed his head.

"I believe you're just making fun of us," declared Gladys. "I don't see why we can't raise just as good apples as you do."

Mr. Pearson slapped his hat back on his head and drew his face down

"MABEL AND GLADYS HERE WANT TO LEARN HOW TO PRUNE APPLE TREES."

solemnly. "I'm not making fun," he assured them. "Let me take the saw, Jeff." And he proceeded to give them a lesson in practical pruning.

"Do you see how it's done?" he asked as he finished the tree and smeared some white lead on the larger wounds. "Don't try to leave pegs long enough to hang your sunbonnets on, but cut the limbs off close."

"We're ever so much obliged," said Mabel. "We'd better be going home, hadn't we?" she added, turning to Gladys.

"Come in and get warm first," said Mr. Pearson. "Jeff 'll bring your horse around in a few moments."

Jeff's few moments was nearly half an hour, and it was almost dark when he drove Mollie up to the door.

"Here's a few books you may be interested in," Mr. Pearson said as they started to leave. "Most of the folks around here don't think much of book farming, but just as like as not they may be mistaken." He chuckled to himself as he closed the door.

"Ain't there something I can do to help you with your apple trees?" asked Jeff as he handed the lines to Gladys. "I ain't very busy now, and I thought maybe"—

"Oh, thank you! But I guess we'll get along all right," said Gladys. "Goodby!"

"Just as if we wanted a big, awkward boy bothering around," she said to Mabel as they turned into the main road.

"Jeff's good if he is awkward," Mabel answered. "I don't like pretty boys."

"I don't like any kind of boys," said Gladys. "Apple trees are so much more interesting."

Mrs. Sanders met the girls with a white face as they turned into the yard.

"Your father is hurt awfully!" she cried. "He cut his foot while he was chopping wood, and I can't seem to stop the bleeding." She caught her breath with a frightened sob.

"Did you phone for the doctor?" asked Mabel as she sprang to the ground.

"Something's the matter with the line," her mother answered. "I can't get any one."

Gladys gathered up the reins and quickly turned Mollie around.

"You can't drive that colt to town in the dark!" cried her mother. "You go with her, Mabel."

"I'm not afraid, mommie," spoke up Gladys. "You need Mabel more than I do. Come on, Mollie!"

It was six miles to Brighton, the nearest place where she could get a doctor, and Gladys well knew that there was no time to lose. If the bleeding didn't stop— She leaned forward and spoke coaxingly to Mollie. The little mare seemed to realize that something was wrong and swung into a stride that made Gladys' heart swell with pride.

The fenceposts sped by in a long, jumbled procession, just visible in the dim, ghostly snow light. Gladys kept her eyes fixed on the strip of white road ahead. Just over the end of it the north star shone brightly. Gladys remembered the old story about the star that had led the wise men and whimsically wondered if this star was not there to lead her. On and on they sped. Mollie never varying from that long, steady stride that covered the ground so quickly and easily.

One, two, three, four miles, and still the little mare showed no signs of slackening her pace. There was no wind—nothing but stars and snow and that long, never ending stretch of white road. It was glorious, this night ride, or would have been if it were not so grimly necessary.

"Can't you go just a little faster, Mollie?" Gladys whispered.

Mollie gave a leap forward. It almost seemed as if they were flying, so little noise did the mare's swift hoof beats make on the snowy road.

Suddenly she gave a leap sideways. There was a crash as one of the runners struck a stone that some one had carelessly lost from his load that afternoon, and Gladys dived headlong into the soft snow at the roadside.

CHAPTER II.

GLADYS picked herself up and shook the snow out of her eyes. The soft snow had broken her fall and kept her from getting hurt. She looked around for Mollie and saw her standing in a drift up to her knees a little ways down the road, with nothing left of the cutter but the thills. In a moment Gladys had waded through the snow to the mare and was loosening the thill straps. As soon as the thills were unfastened she leaped to Mollie's back and headed her again toward town and the doctor.

Mollie was much better as a driver than as a rider, and Gladys found riding her without a saddle hard, jolting work. But she set her teeth and held grimly to the little mare's mane, urging her to a still faster gait.

She was almost to the town now and could see the light in the doctor's big house on the corner. In another moment she was at the door. Giving Mollie's reins a twist around the post, she ran up the steps and rang the doorbell.

The doctor's wife opened the door. "The doctor?" she said in reply to Gladys' breathless question. "I'm sorry, but he started to Kensett just about ten minutes ago."

Gladys started back as if she had been struck. The doctor's wife sprang forward and caught her. "Why, my girl," she cried, "you're all tired out. Come in and get warm."

Gladys shook her head. "I—I must catch the doctor," she gasped. "Has he a saddle I can take?"

The doctor's wife, quickly realizing that this was no ordinary call, pointed toward the barn and hurried into the house after the lantern. It was but a moment's work to throw off the harness and replace it with the saddle. Gladys hesitated an instant and then reached for the doctor's riding whip. She was so stiff that she could hardly swing into the saddle, but she smiled bravely back at the good doctor's wife as she turned away into the darkness.

Kensett was directly west, and her own home was straight south. If she could catch the doctor soon enough he might still be able to get there in time. But what chance did a weary colt ridden by a still wearier girl have of overtaking a fresh team of broncbos? Gladys leaned forward and spoke caressingly to Mollie. The little mare sprang nimbly forward, but Gladys felt rather than saw that she was not running as easily as at first.

Minute after minute passed and still the mare held pluckily to her pace. At last after what seemed hours of hard riding Gladys heard the tinkle of sleighbells ahead. She knew the time had come for the final spurt. She raised her whip to strike the struggling mare, but threw it in the snow instead.

"Mollie!" she cried, leaning forward. "Go, Mollie, go—just for a few moments more!"

Mollie gave a snort that was almost a groan and struck a slightly faster pace. Louder and louder sounded the bells, and soon Gladys could see the sleigh as a black speck ahead.

Then she called with all her might, and the sound of the bells stopped abruptly. In a moment she was beside the doctor's cutter and in a few gasping sentences told her story.

"Ride up to the Greys' and have them put that colt in the barn and give her a good rubbing down," the doctor ordered. "She's done a great night's work tonight. And tell Mrs. Grey to give you some hot coffee and put you to bed!" He shouted the last words back over his shoulder as he turned quickly around and commenced his part of the race with life and death.

That climb up the hill to the Greys' seemed harder to both Mollie and Gladys than all the rest together. Mr. Grey lifted the exhausted girl from the saddle and led the steaming mare away to the barn, while his wife put Gladys in the big chair back of the stove and set the old granite coffeepot on to boil.

At home Mrs. Sanders and Mabel watched and waited anxiously. Mr. Sanders moaned and tossed in a feverish delirium. The towel which they had twisted tightly around his leg had failed to stop the bleeding entirely, and the faces of the silent watchers grew white with fear as they saw the blood slowly oozing from the tightened bandages.

The patient grew weaker and more delirious as the hours passed. Mrs. Sanders ran to the window every minute or so to peer out into the darkness.

"He ought to be coming!" she cried hysterically. "Oh, what if anything has happened to Gladys?"

Mabel tried to comfort her, but with little success. At last they heard the jingle of sleighbells, and almost before they had time to look the big doctor himself was at the door.

"I wonder if you can put my team in," he said to Mabel as he threw off his coat and stepped over to where the injured man lay.

Mabel ran to put away the broncbos and then came back and stood holding her mother's hands while the doctor worked. Somehow his masterful presence was reassuring, and they breathed freer in the confidence that their respect for his skill inspired.

"There," he said at last, straightening up. "He'll be all right now as soon as the fever goes down. We'll have him on his feet again in a week. It wasn't a moment too soon, though," he added. "I want to tell you Mrs. Sanders, that you have a daughter to be proud of. She saved her father's life tonight." And he proceeded to tell the story of as much of that lonely night ride as he knew.

When Gladys came down to breakfast the next morning an unwonted pallor on her cheeks was the only visible effect of her hard night ride. She stopped in surprise as she entered the dining room door. A tall, handsome youth, with the self assured smile of one who has supreme confidence in his own ability to do and say the right thing at the right time, came forward with a low bow.

"Harold Du Val!" cried Gladys. "What are you doing out here?"

Harold held out his hand with a smile. "I might ask you the same question, only I happen to know already," he replied. "You're a brave girl, Gladys."

"You haven't answered my question yet," persisted Gladys, the color heightening in her cheeks.

"Oh, that's easy. Didn't you know Mr. Gray was my uncle? I've been sick, and the folks sent me out her to recuperate."

The announcement of breakfast cut short further conversation. After the meal was finished Harold insisted on hitching up and taking Gladys home.

"I thought you were sick," she said. "I can ride Mollie just as well as not."

"I'm not sick enough to let the girl who used to work most of my problems for me ride eight miles on horseback," he replied as he put on his overcoat and started for the barn.

"What have you been doing since you left high school?" asked Gladys when they were on their way.

Harold winced a little at the tone of her question. "Oh, nothing much," he answered. "Father wants me to go to college, but I don't like to study well enough."

"What are you going to do?" Gladys went on. "You surely don't mean to go on doing nothing all your life."

"Why not?" inquired Harold as he tilted his hat a little to one side. "I'm having a pretty good time as it is."

"Is that all the ambition you have—just to have a good time?" A disappointed surprise shone in Gladys' honest brown eyes.

"Oh, come now," Harold answered lightly. "This is getting too serious. Let's talk about something else—yourself, for instance."

"There isn't anything to say on that subject, only—oh, I wonder how dad-

MR. SANDERS CALLED HER HIS BRAVE GIRL

dy is. If you don't stop talking and drive faster I shall have to get out and ride Mollie."

Thus admonished, Harold gave the horse a sharp slap with the reins and during the remainder of the ride devoted his attention entirely to his driving.

Gladys found her father lying propped up in bed, conscious, but very weak from loss of blood. He clasped her hand tightly and called her his brave girl, and she blushed and said she hadn't done anything, but for all that they seemed to understand one another better from that time on than they had ever done before.

Mr. Sanders was able to be around with the aid of a crutch in a few days, but it was a long time before his foot was entirely well.

The weather turned cold for several weeks after this, but when it did finally warm up the girls started out to prune their apple trees. They had only one saw, and that was far from sharp, but they took turns sawing and piling brush. It was hard work, but they kept resolutely at it and made good progress. One day Gladys was working alone down near the road when Jeff Pearson drove up to the fence.

"Hello, Gladys!" he called, a little diffidently, as he jumped to the ground and tied his horse to a post. "Don't you want some help?"

"Oh, I'm getting along very nicely," replied Gladys, sawing away vigorously.

Jeff came over and stood beneath the tree where she was at work. "Isn't that pretty hard work?" he asked.

"Well, a little," she confessed. "But we've trimmed twenty-five already, and there's only ten more to do."

"Let me do that while you rest," persisted Jeff, seizing a limb and pulling himself up into the tree.

"Well, since you want to so badly, I suppose I'll have to let you," Gladys said as she reluctantly handed him the saw.

"Where did you learn to be so polite?" asked Jeff.

Gladys smiled a little. "I'm not being very nice, am I?" she said. "But boys are such nuisances"—

The sentence ended in a half stifled cry as the limb on which she was sitting suddenly gave way with a loud crack. It was not very far to the ground, and the fall did not hurt her in the least—that is, nothing but her pride.

"That was the finest branch on the whole tree," said Jeff regretfully as soon as he saw that she was unhurt.

"If it hadn't been for you, Jeff Pearson, it would never have happened. I don't care if I break them all off now," and, grasping the broken stub, she swung herself up and sat down on another branch.

"I don't believe there's any danger of this one breaking," said Jeff teasingly as he sat down beside her. He seemed to be rapidly getting over his diffidence.

Gladys turned her head away and did not deign a reply.

"Say, Gladys," spoke up Jeff after a few moments, "I don't know what you're thinking about, but I've just thought of a scheme to get double pay out of the old orchard."

Gladys turned quickly toward him. "What is it?" she demanded.

"Plant something else in between the trees. Take cabbage, now. You could raise—let me see—about 11,000 cabbages on an acre. At 10 cents apiece that would come to $1,100. It will be a lot of work, but I'll come over after supper evenings and help you hoe them."

"And leave all your chores for some one else to do?" queried Gladys.

"I guess they'd manage it some way," he replied.

"And I guess they wouldn't. I've a good notion to try raising cabbages, but if you say anything more about helping us I'll get mad, Jeff—honest, I will. You see, father told us we could have all that we could get out of the old orchard ourselves, and it wouldn't be fair to let any one else help."

"I don't see why," objected Jeff. "But you'll let a fellow come over and watch you once in awhile, won't you?"

"Y-yes; I don't suppose we can help your looking at us if you want to, but— Oh, there's the supper bell! Good night!" And she leaped to the ground and hurried toward the house.

To be continued.